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The Source of the Nova Constellatio Copper Coinage

submitted by

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THE ARTICLE entitled "The Mint of North America and Its Coinage," by Walter Thompson, in the November, 1959 Numismatic Scrapbook Magazine engages in certain speculation as to the source of the Nova Constellatio copper coinage. In some respects this speculation can be confirmed by evidence and in other respects can be clarified.

The London Morning Chronicle of March 16, 1786 contained the following news which was republished in the New York Daily Advertiser of May 26, 1786:

"A correspondent observes, that the paragraph which has lately appeared in several papers, respecting a copper coinage in America, is not true. The piece spoken of, bearing the inscription, 'Libertas et Justitia, &c.' was not made in America, nor by the direction of Congress. It was coined at Birmingham, by the order of a merchant in New-York, many tons were struck from this die, and many from another; They are now in circulation in America, as counterfeit half pence are in England."

While one enthusiast has searched the newspaper files in the British Museum for the "paragraph" which gave rise to this comment, for the moment it remains illusive. However, the English source of the Nova Constellatio coppers is specifically confirmed along with the fact that the coinage was a private business venture undertaken by a New York merchant.



Nova Constellatio Copper Coin

Gouverneur Morris undoubtedly qualifies as a New York merchant. As assistant to the Superintendent of Finance of the United States he was the author of the decimal coinage plan submitted by Robert Morris to the Continental Congress on January 15, 1782 and pursuant thereto developed the denominations and sizes for the coinage of the Nova Constellatio silver patterns of 1783. The design of the Nova Constellatio coppers was copied directly from the silver patterns and no one other than the group connected with the Mint of North America would have had access to those patterns (five specimens exist) or to the four pairs of dies⁽¹⁾ from which they were

struck. There would have been vigorous complaints from both Robert Morris or Gouverneur Morris if someone else had privately appropriated the Nova Constellatio design without permission. The conclusion is almost inescapable that Gouverneur Morris was the New York merchant referred to.

Although some Nova Constellatio coppers dated 1783 may have been introduced into American circulation before 1785 the quantity was at best quite limited. This is shown by announcements in American newspapers in 1786 indicating no previous knowledge of the coppers. The Massachusetts Sentinel (Boston, Mass.) of May 10, 1786 and the Hartford Courant (Hartford, Conn.) of May 15, 1786 stated:

"It is said that 40 tons of copper have been coined in half pence, at Greenwich, in England, for American circulation. Device—on one side, an Eye, Providence and thirteen stars—The reverse, U.S.—Better these than that bane to honesty, paper money."

A similar announcement had been made in the New Haven Gazette of May 4, 1786. It will be noted that the source of the coins in these earlier statements is Greenwich, near London, rather than Birmingham, but the English origin is undisputed.

There is also the following enlightening announcement in the Essex Journal and Massachusetts and New Hampshire General Advertiser of March 29, 1786, endeavoring to encourage legislation authorizing copper coinage for Massachusetts:

"WORCESTER March 13

"New-York, Connecticut and Vermont have authorized a person in each of those States to coin coppers; numbers of them are now in circulation; they are in general well made, and of good copper, those of New-York in particular. Was a person authorized in this State for the same purpose, it would undoubtedly prevent the manufacturing of those made of base metal."

It was erroneously thought by the writer of the above excerpt that the State of New York had authorized copper coinage. The New York coinage referred to had to be the Nova Constellatio coinage as there are no coppers attributable to New York dated 1786 or earlier except the 1786 Non Vi Virtute Vici which is weak in detail and from its rarity only a few could have made their appearance. The comment that the New York coppers were particularly well made indicates they are superior to the earlier series of Connecticut and Vermont coppers. Specimens of 1783 Nova Constellatio copper coin are found beautifully and clearly struck on well made planchets and varieties Crosby 2-B and 3-C are known in such superb condition that they could now be classified as proofs. This quality of coppers is further evidence of their English origin, as such work could not then have been accomplished in America.

The dies for the Nova Constellatio coppers were prepared subsequently to and separately from the Mint of North America project. Of the eight dies officially prepared at the Mint of North America seven are accounted for in the known silver patterns. The missing one should be the mate to the obverse die of the quint of 500 units which obverse lacks any legend. However, Samuel Curwen of Boston in the May 15, 1784 entry in his diary carefully describes a Nova Constellatio pattern given to him as having the

denomination of 5, but it has been stated that he had a silver pattern of 500 units rather than a copper pattern of 5 units and erroneously wrote down 5 instead of 500.⁽²⁾ If any die for either of the specified copper coins (5 units or 8 units) under the Morris proposal had been cut by the Mint of North America artisans it would have needed a denomination on it in like manner to the silver pieces in order for the coin to be acceptable for introduction to the accomodation of multiple exchange ratios. Since no



Nova Constellatio Pattern

known variety of a Nova Constellatio copper has a denomination upon it none could be a part of the Mint of North America activity.

Crosby listed three reverse dies of 1783, five reverse dies of 1785 and one reverse die of 1786. He classified eight obverse dies, one of which is used both with a 1783 reverse (3-C) and with a 1785 reverse (I-B), tying these two groups together. The only other known Nova Constellatio variety (excluding the Immune Columbia combinations) is a rare 1785 copper struck from crudely made dies with only 12 stars and rays,⁽³⁾ apparently an American-made imitation of the period. The 1783 and 1785 coppers are known today in sufficient quantity to indicate a very large production from a limited number of dies. This would have been possible only in England and not in America. Their copper content was so free of impurities that many were subsequently overstruck in the making of Vermont and Connecticut copper coinage.

"Bushnell's Numismatic Notes"⁽⁴⁾ specifically state that Thomas Wyon cut the dies for the Nova Constellatio coppers in Birmingham. Although Bushnell's accuracy on numismatic matters has often been questioned where a coin in his own collection was involved it is reasonable to accept his designation of the die cutter of a set of common coppers as he was in contact with many English numismatists who knew such facts.

The conclusion to be drawn is that the Nova Constellatio coppers were struck in Birmingham from dies made there by Thomas Wyon; that they were imported for American circulation as a private business venture of Gouverneur Morris of New York, and that they had no relationship to the coinage of the Mint of North America other than being a copy of the design of its silver patterns.

- (1) On May 5, 1783 A. DuBois was paid \$72.00 for making four pairs of dies (Crosby p.310).
- (2) American Journal of Numismatics (1869), Vol. IV, p.35; See Crosby p.312 where the fact that he was unaware of the existence of the 100 unit piece led him to improper conclusions.
- (3) Walter Breen, "Blundered Dies of Colonial and U.S. Coins," Empire Topics (Summer 1958), No.2, p.18.
- (4) Sylvester S. Crosby, "Early Coins of America" (Boston 1873), p.331.